Coverdale–Imperator Rex!

Or, how a totally - unknown chariot-driver broke away from the Plebiscite and succeeded to the Imperial Purple

Scribe:
TONY STEWART

Bas-reliefs:
PENNIE SMITH

DEAR SIR,

I heard that Ian Gillan is leaving Deep Purple and my friends persuaded me to send in a tape. Please excuse the quality but I hope you'll give it a listen.

My phone number is on the tape box if by some small chance you want to speak to me.

Regards David Coverdale.

COVERDALE'S LETTER of application for the situation then vacant in Deep Purple certainly doesn't exude an aura of either burning ambition or single-minded self-confidence.

But a struggling semi-pro singer who worked by day in a boutique probably believed it'd take more than a demo-tape, letter and snapshot to bring about an exchange between the drab interior of a Redcar shop and the bright lights of superstardom in the Metropolis. So naturally, there's a reticent and embarrassed air to the letter.

Whether by mercy of providence or merely in recognition of an Enormous Talent Coverdale's approach was, as you know, successful. A speculative gambit paid off.

And having just celebrated his first anniversary with the band he is in a position to clarify his intentions behind the letter by comparing it to another missive received recently by Purple.

"There was a guy who sent a tape of 'Black Knight' with piano accompaniment," he tells, "and a letter saying, 'Dear Deep Purple, I'm not very good looking but me Mam thinks I am. But I would like to sing with your group because I think it would be great. I'm going to play 'Black Knight' now'.

"And the band were really touched, although obviously it was very naive. It could have paid off. I sent mine in with the same intention.

"When I came for the job with Purple I didn't expect to get it," he continues modestly. "But I would have liked it. I knew they had their own label and their own stable of artistes, and I was hoping for a job as a songwriter. But obviously I would have *preferred* the job singing with the band, but I didn't expect that my throat was the one they were looking for. And I certainly didn't have that sort of image."

Even now Coverdale is still a little reluctant to forsake his previous anonymity and transform himself into the image of the Famous Mr. Coverdale. And his purpose in being front man of this, or any other band, has not altered since being just another yob in Redcar.

"I'll be honest," he begins, "and I don't want NME cynicism — but I never considered being a rock and roll star and I never wanted to be, and I don't consider it now although it gets drummed into me occasionally.

"I wanted to be a purveyor of good music. Like, my record collection is excellent, displaying many tastes, all of which have got something to do with — not soul, but *feel*. I have things by John Williams, Sergio Mendes, Miles Davis and Otis Redding — anything I can interpret; anything I can identify with."

Equally so Coverdale can now himself be identified as a stalwart member of Deep Purple, having successfully completed active service on extensive tours and in the studio. A glance at the composing credits of their second album together, "Stormbringer" — which is due for imminent release — shows he has not been idle when it comes to writing either — on this occasion, teaming up with both Ritchie Blackmore and Jon Lord.

In all respects he's rowed himself in nicely, you could say.

THE ABSOLUTE evidence of Coverdale's undisputed position was when the rest of Purple apparently elected him their Official Representative to meet the press last week and so grab some publicity for the new album.

With that in mind their publicist rustled up as many journalists as possible, sat Mr. C. behind a desk at Purple Records' West One offices, and, at hourly intervals, gave him a change of face and tape recorder. When we arrived in the late afternoon, he appeared to be bearing up remarkably well, whereas other artistes in his position are usually drunk, harrassed or asleep at a similar stage.

He, however, was very much alert, amiable, talkative and sober. Producing a half-bottle of Teachers he assured us he'd soon remedy the latter misfortune. With the gentleman in such good spirits it would have been an appropriate time to discuss *"Stormbringer"*, but the PR machinery had temporarily malfunctioned and I'd obviously not had time to hear a test pressing produced only five minutes before my encounter with David. The fact that it was even mentioned at all was purely good fortune.

Had I not attempted to prompt a conversation into the intimate secrets of DP by recalling an anecdote involving Ritchie Blackmore, we might never have discussed it at all.

"I get on very well with Ritchie," says Coverdale diplomatically, as he cautiously moves us away from a sensitive area.

"I accept him for what he is," he continues, "and he accepts me for what I am. And it's very successful when it comes down to writing. We have the same influences.

"I've also done some writing with Jon (Lord) this time, and we came up with some good ideas, the majority of which are not on the album. In fact, there's two.

"There's a song called 'Holy Man', and a thing called 'Hold On', which Mr. Bowie I believe is interested in recording."

Eh?

"From what I heard, yeah," he replies with obvious pleasure.

"He came round to see us a few times in LA and was very nice, and I think he said he was interested in doing that particular song. I'd be interested to hear what he does with it, 'cause it seems a little unusual for his taste.

"I'm chuffed with it," he remarks (about the whole set), "because there's a lot of new ideas going down, which are very negative to the general idea of Deep Purple.

"It isn't contrived rock and roll. It's just that we write what we enjoy and, fortunately a lot of people dig it.

"The thing is it's so good adrenelin-wise to perform fast rock and roll. It's a good fantasy to be involved in. Like, ten years ago James Dean was the thing. Everybody had their elbow hanging outside an open topped car. That was a fantasy.

IT IS in fact his oblique references that causes our discourse to trample pretty thoroughly through his pre-Purple days — and, thankfully, away from any further mention of the album.

No, I still haven't heard it, but invariably when a set is first released musicians allow their enthusiasm for the recording to by-pass their critical faculties, and it's only a year later they consider the set objectively.

Would you really expect Coverdale to knock it at the moment?

Anyway, it appears art was the only other worthwhile activity in which he was involved prior to writing his letter. Sadly it was short lived because his romantic illusions of painting and living in a grimy garret were shattered by the commercial realities of art college, which then caused him to consider Graphic Design as a career. But, again, he was disillusioned — and so turned to teaching.

"When I realised the amount of years it would take to get into that particular craft I couldn't handle it," Coverdale recounts.

"I just couldn't envisage all those bloody years of sitting doing the Learning Bit. I'm very interested in learning, obviously, but I couldn't handle the idea of living on six quid a week for that amount of time.

"It wasn't *immediate* enough for my age. I was a young lad, with all the adrenalin and excitement of being young and going round jumping on ladies' bellies and dancing on them."

Nevertheless he still harboured romantic ideals and was greatly influenced by the lyrics of the songs of the time, even though he later discovered he's been duped — *again*.

"Bolan has a song saying 'You Can't Fool The Children Of The Revolution', — but unfortunately you can, I think. And a lot of people in my generation have been fooled. I was one of them. I didn't realise people could get on the road and sing about the streets of Paris and South America only because they were *millionaires*. They could fly there and live in bloody luxury hotels and find out the street names and make it sound very romantic — for somebody, for instance, who lived in Redcar-by-the-Sea, Cleveland.

"But at the time this was terrific to me. My lifestyle was built around the philosophies of the Yardbirds and all that sort of thing.

"I tried hard to *live-for-today*, but I developed intellect — or a little more maturity — and got to the point of believing romanticism can certainly be overruled by material realism.

"Like, I love records, but you need a certain amount of sponds" (bread) "to be able to buy records. To hear records? Well, you'll need a stereo. I remember sacrificing my little mono record player, courtesy of my mother, which was a Bush — a little bastard, it was grand. It cost £39 and I traded it in for 12 quid on an ITT KB 1250 stereo, which left a lot to be desired, but at the time was ace."

So what you're basically saying is you can't be a hippy without some bread?

"Yeah. You can't indulge in that kind of philosophy without it. From what I remember the hippy philosophy is to be totally self-sufficient, which you can't be if you're dependent on society — for instance, on social security, which I've been on as well. One pound and bloody five pence a week I got, mate," he recalls with bitterness. *"Grand*, eh? And now they want 98 per cent of my money off me."

But the beer was cheaper up North.

"It still didn't pay the sodding flat, I tell you.

"But I had my eyes opened rudely by things happening around me. When I go home now I see a lot of my friends. A lot of them are very depressed. They've settled down with wives and started building homes. Which I admire.

"I haven't got the feeling of wanting those sort of roots yet. Although I dash home whenever I can."

At the time Coverdale mentions he was quite obviously living very much in a fantasy world — something he now readily admits, relating it once more to his present position.

"People indulge in fantasies," he explains. "I'm quite sure you do. I've got them. I go and see 'Dirty Harry' or 'Magnum Force' and I think Clint Eastwood's hot, and come out feeling a little drab. Or I see Bruce Lee and think 'Oooh, I wouldn't mind having a go at that'. A fantasy is something you create in your mind. I'm very against violence, but I would love to have the power to sort out half a dozen guys if they started pissing about with somebody. You need that fantasy because day-to-day life is dreary.

"What upsets me is people think there's so much bloody glamour in this business. But it's about time people realised there *isn't* so much glamour".

Hang on, David, you'd better explain yourself.

"Well because the fantasy of that glamour thing, like the old Hollywood, is necessary to a lot of people. I don't mean the *supposed* glamour that's supposed to surround us when we have press receptions or anything like that. The glamour is when you walk on stage and you have thousands of kids going crazy. Audience reaction is the best dope in the world. It's the greatest high I've ever had in my life.

"But I didn't experience it until Copenhagen last year when I did my first gig with Purple."

This quest for adulation has obviously been the motivating force to keep Coverdale going. In fact, one reason why he resorted to the hardship of Social Security benefits ("which made me feel like a shit-house as a human being") was so he could pursue a musical career.

"The last job I had before being umemployed," he remembers, "was a band leader. Which really meant I led a nightclub trio. But you can imagine there was animosity between me and the people I was asking for money because of this.

"I was living with a lady at the time who had a child — who wasn't mine, although I felt he was because I loved him that much. So I was supporting a family. And the bastards gave me £1.5 a week. If it hadn't been for my parents . . .

"What really pisses me off is for six years I made nothing — yet now they want so much money out of me But I'm making a crust which might only be for a year, two years or three. God knows! But what the people in this silly tax thing don't realise is . . it could stop anytime.

"Purple is the sort of band that's got to the top and if there's any hint of them going down they'd call it a day."

Really? Now *this* is worth asking about.

"It's never been discussed with the band, but I certainly don't think they'd go down. I don't think they'd watch that happening. They'd rather retire up there," he points to the ceiling, "separate and go their individual ways, but leave the name of Deep Purple respected by the fans as it is.

"Each member of the band is very proud, particularly the trio that Glenn (Hughes) and I joined last year. And I'm quite sure they wouldn't ride downhill."

"What I mean is, if they felt they couldn't go any further — as they did with the last Deep Purple and the first Deep Purple — they'd change the band. But if they ever got that feeling with Glenn and I, I don't think they'd bother again.

"Glenn and I walked in with our bread buttered. It could have fallen on its ass, but fortunately it didn't. Which I'm very proud of because it was a big pair of shoes I was standing in."

COVERDALE WAS not without his opportunities before the Purple gig, and he now believes there would have been a strong possibility of his joining Alan Bown when Jess Roden left, or Colosseum before Chris Farlowe joined. Unfortunately, at the time he never considered he'd be seriously considered for either job.

The group which he would mostly dearly have liked to join was the Grease Band when Cocker departed. But then Monsieur Joe is one of the great influences on Coverdale's vocals.

"I identified with Cocker immediately because he was like Ray Charles. I met him a few times, years ago, and I love him. I would like to line up and shoot the people who put him in the situation he's in now. Because I see Joe as a tube of toothpaste which has been squeezed. That bloke was so talented."

"I adapt from everybody who I like and it's stored in my memory banks, and I use licks from everybody who's made an impression on me. Which goes from Rod Stewart to Robert

● *Continues next page*

Chariots of the Gods (Deep Purple)

From previous page

Johnson, Bobby Blue Bland, B. B. King, Albert King and so many other black cats. There are not really many white people I appreciate."

Trying to explain how he is subconsiously affected by other artistes he refers to his writing style as illustrated by the title track of the new album.

"I wrote the lyrics about a mythical creature called Stormringer who, in a surrealistic story, creates a lot of trouble. It's similar to the idea of 'Burn'.

"But I never even considered Michael Moorcock's work."

It was only when he showed the lyric to another member of the band that a comparison to the Mo rcock work ("Stormbringer" is the name of a fearsome sword; was made. Then when David arrived home from Munich, where the album was recorded, he discovered some of Moorcock's SF novels among a trunk of paperbacks.

"In my mind," Coverdale asserts, "I'd created the character called 'Stormbringer'. Which also could have come from my childhood interest in mythology. Thor, the God of Thunder had a hammer called 'Stormringer', didn't he?" (no — Ed.).

"But mythology was another fantasy for me. I always imagined myself at the Pass of Thermopylae — you know, being a hero like the 300 Spartans who defended Greece or something."

He does sound rather vague about it all, but assures me that "before I became a rock and roll star I could answer all the Greek mythology questions on University Challenge. Not bad for a 14-year-old, eh?

"It was," he adds, "a fantasy I could indulge in.

"I was fortunate because I lived in a large house, which was part of a workingmens club, and I had what I called my music room. It was an enormous room in which I used to build all sort of constructions like Roman galleys. I'd indulge in a terrific fantasy with friends of mine who shared all this.

"Steve Reeves was my hero at one time as well. Do you remember him?"

Ah, so he was into being Hercules?

"At the time, yeah. When I decided I wanted to be a rock singer I was really pissed off that I'd developed shoulders, 'cause every pop singer I saw was really skinny."

One look at David Coverdale's broad shoulders, the clean cut square jaw line, and the overall physique of a man who appears to have come successfully through a Charles Atlas course, even now would prevent people recognising him as a rock and roll singer. But then, true to the tradition of all well-bred Northerners, one suspects he'd be greatly outraged if one suggests he should slip into some satin and lose a bit of weight. Or would he?

"I've never regarded myself with an image and I still don't," he tells. "I can't imagine I ever will, unless my bones change shape and shrink to an impossible degree, and my acne vanishes."

But David you're not wearing your spectacles?

"Eh?"

You ain't got your specs on.

"Because they're terrible glasses," he responds with a nervous laugh.

So you haven't dropped the glasses for the sake of your image?

"No. It's because when I jump around they fall off. Practical purposes. So I've got contact lenses, because that was the first time I could afford them. And then I had to borrown the money to get them."

Astutely changing the subject, he continues, "Everyone imagined the moment I signed with Deep Purple that I had £100,000 put into my bank account to put me on a social level with the other members. Several rumours say I've got a couple of Lamborghinis and Rollses and 21 acres of land.

"I live over a vegetable shop in Redcar," he admits. "I've got a lot of bucks behind me, I'm not denying that, but I grafted for them. And I got myself some contact lenses so I wouldn't trip over the microphone leads and look like a silly prat."

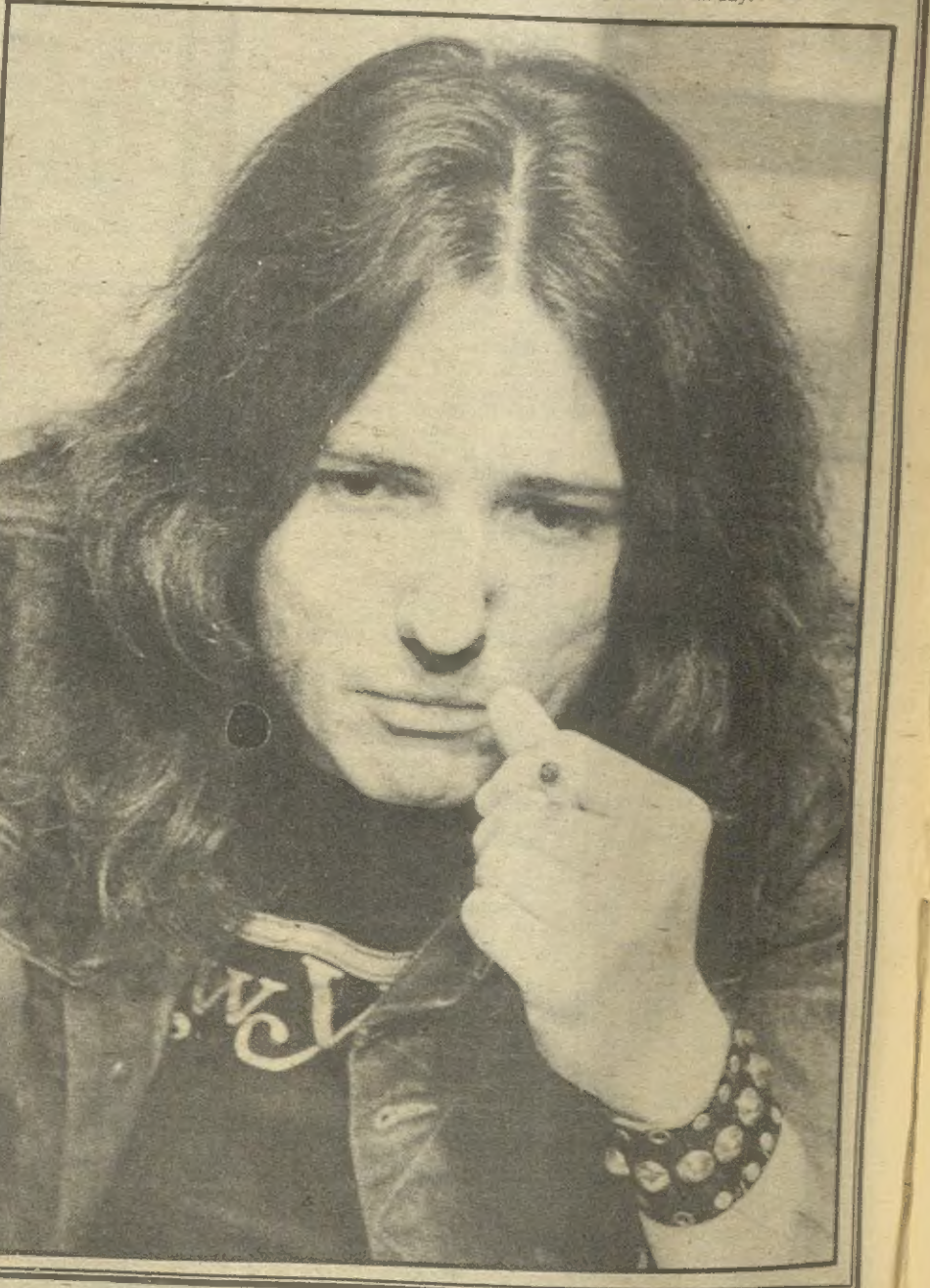
Life with Deep Purple has apparently not unduly affected the personality of Mr Coverdale during his first year with the group.

As he puts it: "I've been given an opportunity which I've grasped firmly with both hands, which anyone would do, for a certain amount of financial security for a certain amount of years. I'd be a fool not to.

"I'm now able to indulge in choices: to eat fish and chips or to eat sirloin steak. Or to go to London for a couple of days *and stay in an hotel* — rather than sleep on a bench. Which I've done, by the way.

"I'm into the material thing because my biggest bloody pain years ago was financial insecurity. How the hell could I fall in love and say to the chick, 'Come and live with me at my Mother's and she and my father will take care of you because I'm a die-hard musician'?

"Fortunately my apprenticeship paid off and I became a fitter.

"The only way I think I've changed is I've got a lot more confidence. 101 per cent instead of 99.

"I rely so much on human relationships — male and female. Male for communication and female for physical. And this," he says in the same breath, "is the best interview I've had all day."